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Exploring the Relationships and Differences of Cultural Identity Salience, Life Satisfaction, and Cultural Demographics Among Emerging Adults

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Exploring the Relationships and Differences of Cultural Identity Salience, Life Satisfaction, and Cultural Demographics Among Emerging Adults

Abstract
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Keywords
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Cover Page Footnote
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KEYWORDS: cultural identity salience, emerging adulthood, life satisfaction, MSJCC, multicultural counseling
Exploring the Relationships and Differences of Cultural Identity Salience, Life Satisfaction, and Cultural Demographics Among Emerging Adults

Professional counseling researchers continue to acknowledge the need for multicultural and social justice research in professional counseling (Clark et al., 2022; Malott, 2010). Scholars have asserted that future multicultural counseling research should incorporate more constructs reflecting cultural identity development than just race/ethnicity for a more holistic look at individuals (McDonald et al., 2019). Research on identity development has focused overwhelmingly on the individual and far less on the cultural context of the individual (McLean et al., 2018); consequently, culture is a less-well developed component of identity. Although research on identity acknowledges the importance of culture, specification of how culture relates to identity processes and contexts is lacking (Syed & McLean, 2015). It might be necessary to consider the ways in which all cultural identities interact with and alter the experience of any single identity to fully understand individuals’ identity development (Syed, 2010).

Cultural identity—defined as the identity shaped by incorporated norms and values that establish an image that individuals hold of themselves (Groen et al., 2018)—provides a holistic context to understand the interactions of the cultural components of individuals. Cultural identity salience signifies the extent to which a culture represents an integral part of an individual’s identity in relation to other social roles (Mohammadi, 2013). The salience and fluidity of any specific identity at any point depends on a variety of intrapersonal and interpersonal factors (Abes et al., 2007). Additionally, it might not be enough to simply identify individuals’ cultural identities; rather, it might be necessary to identify the noticeability of cultural identities within individuals.

An individual’s understanding of their cultural identity is crystalized during emerging adulthood, a developmental stage spanning ages 18 to 29, in which individuals are no longer adolescents, but not yet fully adults (Arnett, 2004; Cohen & Kassan, 2018). Emerging adults have new adult responsibilities, but do not conceptualize themselves as adults. Mental health risks, psychological difficulties, and identity crises are especially prevalent in emerging adulthood due to prolonged identity experimentations and transitions (Lane, 2015; Nice & Joseph, 2023; Schaffer et al., 2022). These risks are evident during emerging adults’ cultural identity development and can affect their overall wellbeing and life satisfaction (Medina et al., 2019). Accordingly, cultural identity is continuing to be understood as paramount to understanding mental health issues in individuals with various cultural identities (Mezzich et al., 2009).

Multicultural counseling research has focused primarily on racial/ethnic groups, without ample attention to other identities, such as gender, spirituality, and sexual orientation (Hays, 2020). To conduct effective counseling research, culture must be expanded to include all cultural categories (O’Hara et al., 2016). Understanding specific cultural demographics (e.g., Asian, female, queer) and their saliences could be crucial to understanding individuals’ privileged and underrepresented identities. For example, understanding the noticeability of an individual’s gender identity might be different if the individual identifies as cisgender male, cisgender female, non-binary, or transgender. Studies that examine multicultural research have consistently found that life satisfaction is higher for individuals aligning with the cultural (e.g., race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender) majority group than those aligning with the minority group (Yap et al., 2011). However, no studies to date have examined how salience, or noticeability of cultural identities relates to the way life satisfaction is perceived, which can be prohibitive considering the benefits one experiences when achieving a high level of life satisfaction.

The Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (MSJCCs; Ratts et al., 2016), provide a framework for addressing these constellations of identities for clients and counselors in the therapeutic relationship, while bringing awareness to important considerations in the counseling process, such as social group statuses, power, privilege, oppression, values, beliefs, and biases (Singh et al., 2020). The MSJCCs were selected as a theoretical framework for this study because they address a constellation of identities in counseling and mental health and conceptualize the salience of cultural identities through a cultural and social justice lens. Emerging adults’ (18–29 years) cultural identity salience might be especially important to understand, considering the central role of identity development in emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2004). Further, emerging adults’ various intersecting cultural identities affect their life satisfaction and overall identity development (Arnett & Tanner, 2006). Thus, to advance the understanding of cultural identity salience in the MSJCC framework, and answer calls by counseling scholars to examine all categories of cultural identity (Hays, 2020; O’Hara et al., 2016), I investigated the salience of various cultural identities on emerging adults’ life satisfaction and their cultural demographics. Although many cultural identities exist in each individual (e.g., ability status, age), the five cultural identities of race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, spirituality, and...
socioeconomic status were chosen for this study to reflect the relevance of identities studied in recent emerging adulthood literature (e.g., Akkan, 2020; LeBrón & Viruell-Fuentes, 2020; Morgan, 2013; Upenieks, 2021).

Cultural Identity Salience and Life Satisfaction

Life satisfaction emerged from research concerning subjective wellbeing, or what society views as “the good life,” or, more broadly, happiness (Diener, 1984); it is defined as an assessment of the quality of a person’s life based on a set of individually derived criteria (Pavot & Diener, 1993). A common theme in the existing multicultural literature indicates life satisfaction is, on average, higher for individuals whose identities align with the in-group and lower for individuals whose identities align with the out-group (Yap et al., 2011). When examining the five cultural identities analyzed in this study, Eng and Tram (2021) found that individuals identify more with their ethnic identity if surrounded by family or peers of the same group. Individuals identifying as a sexual minority typically experience less satisfaction in life (Henrickson & Neville, 2012). Socioeconomic status in relation to life satisfaction is complex, and researchers have found contradictory results on the relationship socio-economic status and life satisfaction (Raats et al., 2019). Still, the correlation between socioeconomic status and life satisfaction is likely strongest and increases the most for individuals who are living in poverty or near-poverty when experiencing a socioeconomic increase (Diener et al., 2008). Regarding gender identity, both cisgender men and cisgender women have been found to experience similar degrees of life satisfaction (Joshanloo, 2018).

Emerging Adulthood Cultural Identity Development

Identity is a principal characteristic of adolescence and emerging adulthood due to a shift in development during this time of the lifespan (Arnett, 2004; Verschueren et al., 2017). Some of the primary cultural identity categories (race/ethnicity, gender, sexual identity, spirituality, and socioeconomic identity) are often further developed during this stage. The contexts and social settings in which emerging adults experience their identity contributes significantly to forming an ethnic/racial identity (Arnett, 2003; Arnett & Tanner, 2006). The ideology of gender as a construct varies if young adults transition through gender roles (Davis, 2007), making it difficult to research gender identity in emerging adults (Shulman et al., 2014). When individuals reach emerging adulthood, almost all will have identified a pattern of sexual attraction for other sex and/or same-sex individuals (Morgan, 2013). Although identity formation in emerging adulthood centers on exploration and possibilities (Arnett, 2004), the transition to adulthood is still commonly associated with heteronormative milestones such as marriage and parenthood (Waters et al., 2011). Emerging adults’ identity exploration also includes exploring the self-definition of their spiritual values and beliefs, often resulting in a disconnect between their spirituality and religiosity (Arnett, 2004).

Even though the degree to which one identifies as spiritual typically decreases in emerging adulthood, young adults for whom spirituality and religiosity are more salient are more likely to experience a host of positive outcomes (McNamara Barry et al., 2010). The disenfranchising circumstances of those in a lower socioeconomic status affect how they experience and develop their identities in emerging adulthood (Azmitia et al., 2008). Emerging adults often experience negative views of self and their financial standing, impeding their life satisfaction in relation to their socioeconomic class identity (Butterbaugh et al., 2020); however, some might not be affected by a lower socioeconomic class due to a belief that they are young and “things will be different later” mentality as they progress to achieve goals in education and their careers (Gomez et al., 2021).

The Current Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate relationships among demographic factors and life satisfaction in the cultural identity salience of emerging adults within the MSJCC framework. Specifically, two research questions (RQs) guided this study:

- **RQ1**: To what degree do participants’ self-reported cultural identity saliences differ by their corresponding demographic characteristic of race/ethnic, gender, sexual, spiritual, and socioeconomic status identity?

- **RQ2**: What are the relationships between the domains of cultural identity salience and life satisfaction?

Hypotheses for RQ1 are multifaceted. Based on the existing literature, it was expected that emerging adults who identify with a spirituality that reflects a belief in a higher power would have a significantly higher spiritual identity salience than emerging adults who identify as atheist or agnostic, due to religious emerging adults feeling spirituality more often, in more contexts of
their life (Stoppa, 2017). Differences between racial/ethnic demographics on racial/ethnic identity salience, gender demographics for gender identity salience, sexual identity demographics and sexual identity salience, and annual earnings and socioeconomic class identity salience were also proposed as exploratory hypotheses due to no directional support in the literature. Similarly, because there was little justification in the literature about directionality in how the salience of cultural identities interact with life satisfaction in emerging adults, no hypotheses were offered for RQ2 when all five identity salience domains’ relations are examined with life satisfaction.

**Method**

**Positionality Statement**

To understand the interpretive lens on the data and discussion, it is important to understand the author’s positionality. The author is a first-generation, U.S.-born, early career scholar in counselor education, who has recently aged beyond the emerging adulthood age range. In line with the various identities examined within this study, the author identifies as a White, straight, cisgender male person.

**Participants**

Of the 510 initial participants in the dataset, 453 had complete or partial files and were included in the analyses. Demographic variables (e.g., age, race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, spirituality, annual income) were also assessed on the survey. Descriptive statistics were used to report the number of valid responses. One participant reported being under the age of 18, while eight participants reported being over the age of 29. These nine responses were removed due to being outside the 18–29 age range of emerging adulthood, resulting in 444 overall valid responses. Mean replacement was used to account for missing data for partially completed files. This sample size was sufficient for running the intended analyses per the results of a power analysis using G-Power, with power \((1 - \beta)\) set at 0.80, \(p < .05\), and two-tailed. An effect size \((r)\) of .24 was drawn from the average of reported effect sizes of empirical studies that address constructs related to this study, \(r = .22\) (Morrison & Hopkins, 2019), \(rs = .19\) and .18 (Szabo & Ward, 2015), and \(rs = .24\) and .38 (Nagy et al., 2003). See Table 1 for the specific demographic identities for the five cultural identity domains.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Descriptive Analysis of Cultural Demographic Information</td>
</tr>
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https://mds.marshall.edu/adsp/vol23/iss1/1
DOI: 10.33470/2161-0029.1158
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>f</th>
<th>%</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>Race/Ethnicity Identity</td>
<td>American Indian or Alaska Native</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>24.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Black or African American</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>6.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hispanic or Latino</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>6.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>White</td>
<td>251</td>
<td>56.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender Identity</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>207</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>231</td>
<td>52.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-Binary</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual Identity</td>
<td>Straight</td>
<td>320</td>
<td>72.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Queer</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>7.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>14.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Another Sexual Identity</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual Identity</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
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<td>34.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Protestant</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>9.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Christian Orthodox</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>8.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jewish</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Buddhist</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sikh</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Atheist (Do not believe in God)</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>9.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Agnostic (Existence of God is unknown)</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>12.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>9.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annual yearly Income</td>
<td>Under $15,000</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>31.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$15,000 - $24,999</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>13.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$25,000 - $34,999</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>15.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$35,000 - $49,000</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>16.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$50,000 - $74,999</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>12.8</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$75,000 - $99,999</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$100,000 - $149,999</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$150,000 and over</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. N = 444*

Measures

Although there are several methods to measure cultural identity salience, the method used in this study emphasized individuals’ context of themselves as holistic cultural beings. Similar to how previous studies captured cultural identity salience (e.g., Wang et al., 2017), cultural identity salience was captured by asking 5 separate ordinal questions to access the salience on a typical day of each of the aforementioned cultural identity domains as pilot data. Each question had response options ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*extremely*). The five questions are: “How aware are you of your ethnicity/race on a typical day?”; “How aware are you of your gender on a typical day?”; “How aware are you of your sexual orientation on a typical day?”; “How aware are you of your spirituality on a typical day?”; “How aware are you of your socioeconomic class on a typical day?”
**Demographics Questionnaire**

Participants provided demographic information as aligned with each of the five cultural identity domains: race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, spirituality, and annual income identification (as an indicator of socioeconomic status).

**Satisfaction With Life Scale**

The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener et al., 1985) is a 5-item scale designed to assess participants’ level of agreement with the satisfaction with life items. Participants are asked to indicate their level of agreement using a 7-point Likert scale with responses ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Sample items include: “I am satisfied with my life in general” and “The conditions of my life are excellent.” The SWLS has strong internal consistency and reliability. Cronbach’s alpha for the total score of the SWLS is also adequate (α = .87).

**Procedures**

Recruitment for participants was completed electronically in two ways: (a) via emails sent to college students’ university email accounts to recruit college-going (n = 341) emerging adults, and (b) via MTurk, a crowdsourcing marketplace to intentionally recruit non-college-going (n = 103) participants. MTurk was used as a recruitment method for non-college going young adults by setting parameters for the survey to only be sent to individuals who: (a) fall within the age range of 18-29, and (b) have never attended college. A stratified convenience sample of emerging adults (N = 444) was used in this study. All data were analyzed using SPSS Statistics Version 27. The survey was administered via Qualtrics Survey Software to both college students’ university email accounts and MTurk following approval from the university institutional review board.

**Data Analysis**

Cultural demographic variable categories were operationalized using all specific categories of each cultural identity demographic (e.g., gender is operationalized as male, female, and non-binary) for race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and spirituality within the MSJCC framework. The demographic variable categories were used this way to understand how specific demographics interact with their corresponding identity salience. Socioeconomic status was operationalized as a continuous variable by asking for participants to disclose their annual salary. See Table 2 for specifics of all cultural demographics and their corresponding cultural identity salience. For RQ1, mean differences in the domains of cultural identity salience were examined separately for each of their corresponding demographic variables. To this end, four one-way analyses of variance (ANOVA) were conducted—one for each domain and corresponding demographic category. Post hoc analyses were conducted using Tukey’s HSD post-hoc test for the categorical characteristic variables. Given that socioeconomic status was viewed as a continuous variable, a separate regression was conducted to determine if a relationship exists between socioeconomic class identity salience and socioeconomic status (annual salary).

**Table 2**

Domains of Cultural Identity Salience With Corresponding Demographic Variables for RQ1

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https://mds.marshall.edu/adsp/vol23/iss1/1
DOI: 10.33470/2161-0029.1158
Cultural Identity Salience Domain | Demographic Variables
--- | ---
Racial/Ethnic Identity Salience | Race Demographics
American Indian Alaska Native
Asian
Black or African American
Hispanic or Latino
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander
White
Other

Gender Identity Salience | Gender Demographics
Male
Female
Non-Binary
Transgender

Sexual Identity Salience | Sexual Orientation
Straight
Queer
Bisexual

Spiritual Identity Salience | Religious Beliefs
Catholic
Protestant
Christian Orthodox
Jewish
Buddhist
Sikh
Atheist (Do not believe in God)
Agnostic (Existence of God is unknown)

Socioeconomic Status Identity Salience | Socioeconomic Class (Yearly Income)
Continuous Variable of Income

For RQ2 a series of bivariate correlations was run to compare the salience of each of the cultural identity domains with life satisfaction (with a Bonferroni-adjusted critical p-value of .01). Next, for each of the cultural identity domains that significantly correlated with life satisfaction, a multiple regression analysis was run to investigate the contribution of each of these significant cultural identity salience domains to the prediction of life satisfaction, controlling for the demographic characteristics that were significant in the results of the previous ANOVA analyses.

**Results**

Emerging adults who had never attended college made up 23.2% of the sample (n = 103). Of college-going participants, 81 were currently in undergraduate college and 102 had completed a bachelor’s or associate degree; 79 were in graduate school and 79 had completed a master’s or doctorate degree. The mean age of participants was 24.9 years. Analyses were conducted to determine any violations of assumptions for the analyses conducted in this study. Scatterplots were visually inspected, and no outliers were detected. An inspection of skewness and kurtosis among the individual variables was run using the SPSS Descriptions function. All variables were normally distributed—none exceeded the generally accepted 1.0- or -1.0-point range for either skewness or kurtosis.

RQ1 was investigated by conducting a one-way ANOVA to examine differences in race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, spirituality, and socioeconomic status by ratings on each of their five corresponding cultural identity salience domains. Significant effects were found for each of these analyses. Specifically, the overall ANOVA for racial/ethnic identity salience with race demographics was significant, $F(7, 436) = 6.94, p < .001$, with a medium effect size, $n_p^2 = .10$. The Tukey’s HSD test
indicated that emerging adults who identified as Asian Americans ($M = 3.4$, $SD = 1.0$) and Black or African Americans ($M = 3.9$, $SD = 1.1$) reported significantly higher racial/ethnic identity salience than emerging adults who identified as White ($M = 2.8$, $SD = 1.2$).

The overall ANOVA for gender identity salience with gender demographics was also significant, $F(3, 440) = 3.53$, $p = .01$, with a small effect size, $\eta^2_p = .02$. The Tukey’s HSD test indicated that female emerging adults ($M = 3.7$, $SD = 1.1$) reported significantly higher gender identity salience than those who identified as male ($M = 3.3$, $SD = 1.2$).

The overall ANOVA for sexual identity salience with sexual orientation was similarly significant, $F (4, 435) = 2.72$, $p = .03$, with a small effect size, $\eta^2_p(2) = .02$. However, the Tukey’s HSD test found no significant differences between emerging adults who identified as queer, straight, or other sexual identities. This result could indicate that not all emerging adults experience their sexual identity the same, but there is no evidence of how specific sexual identities differ from each other.

Consistent with the hypothesis, the overall ANOVA for spiritual identity salience with religious belief demographics was significant, $F(10, 430) = 4.40$, $p < .001$, with a medium effect size, $\eta^2_p(2) = .09$. The Tukey’s HSD test indicated that Catholic ($M = 3.3$, $SD = 1.2$), Protestant ($M = 3.6$, $SD = 1.4$), and Christian Orthodox ($M = 3.7$, $SD = 1.0$) emerging adults experienced significantly higher spiritual identity salience than emerging adults who identified as Agnostic ($M = 2.4$, $SD = 1.1$) and Atheist ($M = 2.8$, $SD = 1.5$).

Finally, viewing socioeconomic status as a continuous variable, results of the regression analysis examining the relationship between socioeconomic status identity salience with socioeconomic class was significant: standardized $\beta = .11$, $p = .02$, which is a small effect size.

RQ2 was conducted using Pearson correlation coefficients to calculate the relationship between life satisfaction and all cultural identity salience categories, with a Bonferroni-adjusted critical $p$-value of $p < .01$. The correlation between life satisfaction and the race/ethnicity identity salience measure, a positive weak correlation was revealed, $r(444) = .157$, $p < .001$, indicating a significant linear relationship between the two variables. This suggests that the more salient emerging adults’ race/ethnicity is, the more satisfied with their lives they are likely to be. The correlation between life satisfaction and spiritual identity salience was also significantly weakly positive, $r(444) = .213$, $p < .001$, suggesting that the more salient emerging adults’ spirituality is, the more satisfied with their lives they are likely to be. The correlations between life satisfaction and the remaining three categories of cultural identity salience—gender identity salience, $r(444) = .080$, $p = .09$; sexual identity salience, $r(444) = .081$, $p = .09$; and socioeconomic class identity salience, $r(444) = .101$, $p = .03$—were non-significant given the Bonferroni-adjusted $p$-value.

A regression analysis on the cultural identity salience domains that significantly correlated with life satisfaction (race/ethnicity, $\beta = .29$, $p = .32$, and spiritual identity, $\beta = .74$, $p = .004$, salience domains)—controlling for the demographic characteristics that were significant in the ANOVA (race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, spiritual belief, and annual income)—was significant, $F (6, 430) = 8.19$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .14$. This model explained approximately 14% of the variance in life satisfaction.

**Discussion**

Findings for RQ1 on the mean differences between cultural demographics with their corresponding cultural identity saliences produced some significant findings. Asian American and Black or African American emerging adults experienced significantly higher racial/ethnic identity salience than White emerging adults. These results suggest that emerging adults who identify with some underrepresented race/ethnicities might find their race/ethnicity more noticeable than emerging adults who identify as White, which could indicate that emerging adults of underrepresented groups are more aware of their race/ethnicity and have a stronger sense of these identities (Syed & Azmitia, 2008). Female emerging adults experienced significantly higher gender identity salience than males or emerging adults identifying as other genders, indicating that female emerging adults are more aware of their gender than males. God-believing emerging adults experienced higher spiritual identity salience than those who identified as Agnostic or Atheist, indicating that a belief in a higher power makes spirituality more noticeable in more contexts (Stoppa, 2017). Although significant differences were found among emerging adults of different sexual orientations and sexual identity salience, no specific differences between sexual orientations were indicated in this study. Emerging adults were more...
salient in their socioeconomic class identity the higher income they earned each year. This could signify young adults of a lower socioeconomic classes notice their socioeconomic class less because they believe that “things will be different later” due to expected achievement of educational, professional, and economic attainments (Gomez et al., 2021).

For RQ2, racial/ethnic and spiritual identity salience were found to be significantly related to life satisfaction in emerging adults. The regression model was significant when race/ethnicity and spirituality identity saliences were considered while controlling for race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, spiritual belief, and socioeconomic class. These results indicate that race/ethnicity and spiritual identity salience might be the most notable cultural identity components for emerging adults when considering all components that have some significance. Spiritual identity might be salient in young adults due to spirituality/religion often serving as a framework for how someone views the world (Van Tongeren et al., 2020). Racial/ethnic identity might be more noticeable in young adults due to complexities explained in Critical Race Theory (CRT), which describes how power and privilege directly affect and marginalize persons of a minority race/ethnicity (Vereen et al., 2020). CRT posits that persons of a minority race/ethnicity are marginalized from both social and historical contexts, which can cause psychological distress such as intergenerational trauma (Adams et al., 2023). These challenges could increase noticeability of racial/ethnic identities in minority groups.

Theoretical Implications

The findings of this study provide additional support and for advancing the understanding of the MSJCC as a framework by considering the salience, or noticeability, of clients' cultural identities. Cultural identity salience operates as an indicator of individuals’ identification with their cultural demographics and life satisfaction. Conceptualizing cultural identity salience as a theoretical integration with the MSJCC framework can provide counselors with a method of understanding how clients’ salience of their cultural identities can provide a better understanding of their worldview in terms of power, privilege, and oppression. Accordingly, counselors can help clients gain a deeper and more nuanced understanding of their worldview by using the MSJCC to not only reflects clients’ cultural identities, but how noticeable each cultural identity is to the client. For example, using the MSJCC framework, counselors can process with clients why they feel more or less salient in any cultural identity, and how the salience of that cultural identity is affected at various levels and domains (Ratts et al., 2016).

Practice Implications

The results of this study have meaningful implications for professional counselors working with emerging adulthood-aged (18–29 years) clients and their cultural identities. Professional counselors are encouraged to approach emerging adult clients’ identity developments by addressing the salience of their cultural identities in all contexts of identity (e.g., work, home, relationships). Accordingly, interventions could focus on asking emerging adult clients to express how salient they are in each cultural identity and use the MSJCC framework to illuminate how the various saliences are reflected in the intersections of power, privilege, and oppression during their identity development and transitions that are common during emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2004). Using these methods to empower clients of unrepresented cultural groups can be especially beneficial and help decrease societal barriers to enhance their social and emotional well-being (Storlie et al., 2019).

Limitations and Future Research Directions

There are several limitations that should be considered in the context of this study. Identity is a broad and all-encompassing construct with limitless possibilities (Frable, 1997). To capture all of the multidimensional aspects of an individual’s identity would be an impossible task. Many potential cultural identities (e.g., ability status) were not included in this study. Each participant in the current study almost certainly had salience from other identities not assessed in this study that potentially influenced their self-report of the salience of their cultural identity. The measurement of cultural identity salience is also a limitation. To ask about each cultural identity individually, items were all single-item measures, which inherently constrains the reliability of the items (Loo, 2002). However, previous research has shown that single-item measures can be reliable and valid measures of related constructs (e.g., Allen et al., 2022; Cheung & Lucas, 2014). Additionally, the groups composing the sample were nonhomogeneous (e.g., 110 Asian vs. 30 Black or African American vs. 250 White individuals). Gender identity was also limited to cisgender males and females. Due to the low number of transgender, gender expansive, and gender non-conforming
individuals in the study, there was not enough power to run meaningful analyses.

Several areas of this study can be identified for future research. Although, this study measured cultural identity salience by asking participants how noticeable an identity is on a typical day, the salience of identity can change when individuals transition from group to group (Transue, 2007). Future studies should investigate how identity salience changes when individuals transition from different contexts (i.e., work to home) and how identity salience changes longitudinally across the emerging adulthood years.

Although spiritual and race/ethnicity identity salience were revealed to be related to life satisfaction, future researchers could further explore the salience of all the cultural identities emerging adults experience in their developmental pathways. Future investigations on cultural identity salience can assist in understanding the individual differences in the development of emerging adults (e.g., economic conditions, rural or urban upbringing) in relation to satisfaction with life and cultural identity salience (Arnett et al., 2011). Future studies might also benefit from examining identity salience through the lens of intersectionality, to examine the interconnected nature of these identities, and the social inequalities represented through the salience of various intersecting identities (Chan et al., 2018).

Conclusion

Counselors can find utility processing salience of clients’ cultural identities using the MSJCC (Ratts et al., 2016) framework in the therapeutic setting. Racial/ethnic and spiritual identity salience might be among the most important cultural identities to process with clients given their significance in this study. The results of this study are all within the context of emerging adult-aged individuals (18–29 years), who are in the process of identity development and might benefit most from processing and understanding the salience of their cultural identities (Arnett, 2004; Arnett & Tanner, 2006). Counselors should use the MSJCC framework to process and understand how and why privileged and oppressed cultural identities are salient for clients and how and why clients’ various cultural identities intersect with varying levels of noticeability.
References


